

CHRISTOPHER COX, CALIFORNIA,
CHAIRMAN

JENNIFER DUNN, WASHINGTON,
VICE CHAIRMAN
C.W. BILL YOUNG, FLORIDA
DON YOUNG, ALASKA
F. JAMES SENSENBRENNER, JR., WISCONSIN
W.J. "BILLY" TAUZIN, LOUISIANA
DAVID DREIER, CALIFORNIA
DUNCAN HUNTER, CALIFORNIA
HAROLD ROGERS, KENTUCKY
SHERWOOD BOEHLERT, NEW YORK
LAMAR SMITH, TEXAS
CURT WELDON, PENNSYLVANIA
CHRISTOPHER SHAYS, CONNECTICUT
PORTER J. GOSS, FLORIDA
DAVE CAMP, MICHIGAN
LINCOLN DIAZ-BALART, FLORIDA
ROBERT W. GOODLATTE, VIRGINIA
ERNEST J. ISTOOK, JR., OKLAHOMA
PETER T. KING, NEW YORK
JOHN LINDER, GEORGIA
JOHN B. SHADEGG, ARIZONA
MARK SOUDER, INDIANA
MAC THORNBERRY, TEXAS
JIM GIBBONS, NEVADA
KAY GRANGER, TEXAS
PETE SESSIONS, TEXAS
JOHN E. SWEENEY, NEW YORK



One Hundred Eighth Congress
U.S. House of Representatives
Select Committee on Homeland Security
Washington, DC 20515
October 28, 2003

JIM TURNER, TEXAS,
RANKING MEMBER

BENNIE G. THOMPSON, MISSISSIPPI
LORETTA T. SANCHEZ, CALIFORNIA
EDWARD J. MARKEY, MASSACHUSETTS
NORMAN D. DICKS, WASHINGTON
BARNEY FRANK, MASSACHUSETTS
JANE HARMAN, CALIFORNIA
BENJAMIN L. CARDIN, MARYLAND
LOUISE M. SLAUGHTER, NEW YORK
PETER A. DeFAZIO, OREGON
NITA M. LOWEY, NEW YORK
ROBERT E. ANDREWS, NEW JERSEY
ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON,
DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
ZOE LOFGREN, CALIFORNIA
KAREN MCCARTHY, MISSOURI
SHEILA JACKSON-LEE, TEXAS
BILL PASCRELL, JR., NEW JERSEY
DONNA M. CHRISTENSEN, U.S. VIRGIN ISLANDS
BOB ETHERIDGE, NORTH CAROLINA
CHARLES A. GONZALEZ, TEXAS
KEN LUCAS, KENTUCKY
JAMES R. LANGEVIN, RHODE ISLAND
KENDRICK B. MEEK, FLORIDA

DAVID H. SCHANZER
DEMOCRATIC STAFF DIRECTOR

JOHN GANNON
STAFF DIRECTOR

UTTAM DHILLON
CHIEF COUNSEL AND
DEPUTY STAFF DIRECTOR

Mr. John E. Potter
Postmaster General
Room 10022
475 L'Enfant Plaza, S.W.
U.S. Postal Service
Washington, D.C. 20260

Dear Postmaster General:

As you may be aware, on Wednesday, October 22, 2003, there was a bioterror threat made against certain officials in the City of Woodville, Texas that involved mailed letters containing a powder substance alleged to be biological toxins- specifically, ricin. Luckily, this case was determined to be a hoax. I believe the citizens and local officials of Woodville performed extremely well during this incident. However, the actions of several federal agencies, including USPS, have raised several questions about the federal government's planning, preparedness, and response to a bioterror threat.

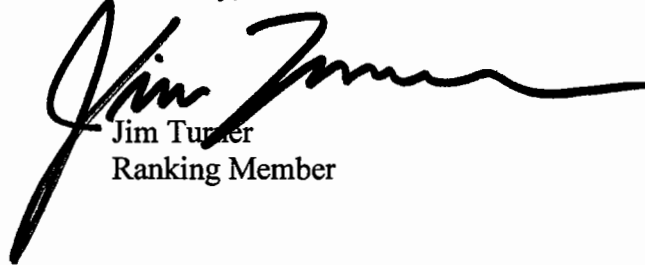
During this incident, the Tyler County Sheriff, who also serves as the county's homeland security coordinator, contacted the USPS Director of Inspections in Houston. The USPS then contacted the Woodville Police Chief and told him an Inspector would retrieve the envelopes. According to the police chief, the inspector arrived on-scene, triple-bagged the envelopes in evidence bags and took them back to Houston. However, she arrived after the City of Houston Health Department lab had closed for the day. It is unclear where the samples were kept overnight. The envelopes containing the suspicious substance were given to the lab the next morning, where lab technicians performed initial tests for general biological agents. The Postal Service's failure to advise the lab that samples were on the way and arrange for prompt testing of these materials was unacceptable, especially because time was of the essence, given that ricin kills its victims within 48 hours, and the fact that just two days before there was a valid ricin incident in South Carolina also involving the USPS. In addition, we learned that at no time did the USPS contact the FBI to advise them that a federal crime may have been committed. These events indicate a lack of responsiveness and timely action to this potential bioterror incident. This must be remedied immediately.

To assist in my review of the federal government's response to the Woodville incident, I would appreciate you providing the following materials no later Tuesday, November 11, 2003:

- an explanation of the Postal Service's protocols for handling a mailed biological threat;
- copies of written guidance provided by the Postal Service to local post offices and USPS Inspectors regarding the handling of a mailed biological threat;
- an explanation of the procedures used to contact federal law enforcement upon the receipt of a mailed biological threat;
- copies of written guidance provided by the Postal Service to local post offices and USPS Inspectors regarding the process for contacting federal law enforcement upon the receipt of a mailed biological threat; and
- a specific explanation of what happened with the sample received at Woodville with respect to why the lab was not contacted immediately; where and how the sample was stored overnight; and why federal law enforcement was not notified of a potential threat.

Thank you for your prompt attention to this matter. I hope a focus on what happened last week in Woodville will improve future USPS responses to bioterror attacks. If you have any questions about this matter, please contact Carla Buckner of my staff at 202-226-2616.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jim Turner", with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

Jim Turner
Ranking Member